

ATTACHMENT 1



Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Commissioner
Stephanie Muth

September 22, 2023

Sent via electronic mail

The Honorable Aurora Martinez Jones,
126th State District Court Judge
Travis County Civil and Family Courts
aurora.martinezjones@traviscountytexas.gov

The Honorable Brandy Hallford,
County Court at Law One, Williamson County
brandy.hallford@wilco.org

The Honorable Cheryll Mabray,
Child Protection Court of the Hill Country
Cheryll.Mabray@txcourts.gov

**PLAINTIFF
EXHIBIT**

2-11-CV-00084

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12-4-23 Show Cause Hearing

Dear Judges,

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) appreciates the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue during the recent meeting regarding concerns raised for our children and youth in conservatorship who are without licensed placement in Region 7.

We understand that frequent and robust communication between DFPS and judges is critical to our joint efforts. During our meeting, DFPS committed to providing you information related to the topics discussed. While our work in these areas is ongoing, we would like to provide an update on our efforts to address child watch:

1. Changes to Child Watch Structure

In partnership with multiple local mental health authorities across the state, DFPS is updating the expectations of youth temporarily staying at child watch locations. Updates include new guidelines and a system for increased structure to incentivize positive behavior. The updated structure will provide transparency to youth regarding rules and routine and will clarify staff expectations for DFPS employees working child watch. In preparation for implementation, DFPS will deploy specialized clinical coordinators to meet and discuss the changes with youth so that they are prepared and understand the new expectations. Clinical coordinators have established relationships with children and youth temporarily staying at child watch locations and are best equipped to help children

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and youth transition to the new structure. Implementation of the new structure will begin in October 2023 once staff training and youth communication is complete. Moving forward, if a youth is placed in child watch, this structure will be relayed to the individual youth when they are initially assigned to a child watch location.

Additionally, as of September 15, a new escalation requiring elevated approval for specific youth entering child watch began. The new process requires Child Protective Services and Child Protective Investigation Associate Commissioner notification if any child up to 10 years of age is at risk of entering child watch for any reason.

2. Safety at Child Watch Locations

The health and safety of youth and staff is of the highest priority. As of September 1, 2023, new contracts for child watch security services were initiated to support DFPS staff and youth awaiting placement. DFPS is consistently reviewing new processes and engaging staff and contracted providers to better intervene when necessary while remaining trauma-focused and supportive to prevent dysregulation, serious incidents, and youth leaving child watch locations without permission.

3. Law Enforcement Engagement at Child Watch Locations

DFPS is coordinating with local law enforcement agencies who have jurisdiction over child watch locations to reiterate the critical need for law enforcement support. As part of the discussion, DFPS will share information regarding child watch locations, the need for consistent and prompt law enforcement response to address worker safety concerns and missing children reports, trafficking concerns, and support for DFPS children who may have experienced criminal victimization while not in our care and supervision. The intent of this communication is to reiterate and support our ongoing law enforcement communication on these topics.

4. Security Assessments at Child Watch Locations

DFPS is currently working with the Department of Public Safety (DPS) to conduct security assessments of all child watch locations in Region 7. Those assessments are specifically targeted to identify risks related to human trafficking. DFPS expects the initial assessments to be conducted by September 30, 2023 and will work with DPS to continue these assessments on an ongoing basis. DFPS will review the results of those assessments to determine whether additional actions are needed to ensure the safety of children and youth temporarily staying at child watch locations.

5. Central Texas Data on Children who are Missing

As of September 18, 2023, there were eight children and youth missing from care in Region 7. Of the eight children and youth missing, two have known sex trafficking history.

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6. Recent Legislative Impact to Placements

Senate Bill 1930 passed during the 88th Regular Legislative Session. The bill amended law relating to policies and procedures regarding children placed by DFPS in a residential treatment center or qualified residential treatment program. Since the effective date of September 1, discussions and confusion regarding requirements of the court and legal party responsibilities prior to a placement occurs have developed. As a result, DFPS will meet with the Children's Commission and the stakeholder workgroup who focused on the bill to reduce confusion and ensure consistent implementation and partnership with Texas Judges and legal parties.

We understand that the successful implementation of the actions outlined will require ongoing communication and cooperation from all parties involved. We are committed to an open line of communication and look forward to working closely with the courts, local mental health authorities, law enforcement entities, staff, and youth to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments.

Thank you again for your dedication to the children and youth in our care. We are confident that collaborative efforts will lead to positive outcomes.

Sincerely,



Jennifer Sims
Deputy Commissioner